

## **Listening to Community Voices: Community-Based Research, a First Step in Partnership and Outreach**

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### **Abstract**

This paper offers some historical perspective on alternative research traditions and discusses some of the basic principles of community-based research as a tool for partnership development. The authors then describe an example of how Calvin College, a Christian comprehensive liberal arts college has used a multi-disciplinary approach in developing community partnerships. Faculty and researchers from different departments and diverse community partners have worked together to engage in participatory action research in one particular neighborhood in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Specific techniques for community-based research are discussed as well as lessons learned and obstacles overcome as we have sought to listen carefully to community voices and to deepen our scholarship of engagement in significant ways. Community-based research can be a bridge between the academy and the community, providing a forum for building relationships, learning from one another, and working together for social change.

### **Introduction**

Community based research has been of growing interest to scholars and practitioners interested in community change. Traditional social science research has often been conducted *on* communities, not *with* them. This has been changing in recent years. A significant body of literature describes alternative research paradigms and approaches to community research that seek to empower local residents as part of the process. A distinction can be made between community research and community-based research. The goal in much of the scholarly literature about community-based research is that community members work as co-researchers alongside academic researchers. Within this view, the investigator and the investigated are interactively linked in ways that influence and shape the inquiry. This interaction between investigator and the subjects of investigation requires dialogue, careful communication, and a certain degree of trust that takes time to develop.

## Historical Perspectives on Alternative Research Traditions

Cooperative inquiry is a broad rubric that can encompass terms such as community-based research, action research, and participatory research. Different scholars use different terminology based on particular aspects they wish to emphasize. However, these research traditions all promote more reciprocal relationships between researchers and subjects and new collaborations between research

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institutions and communities. Despite the different emphases in these various models, they all possess certain common themes. The role of the researcher has been re-defined from detached observer to empathic collaborator. Close, interpersonal exchange will enable researchers to gain meaningful insights into how people understand and make sense of their own behavior. Decisions about how to define the problem to be investigated,

what methodologies to use, and how analysis will occur become a joint responsibility between researchers and participants. Ongoing reflection by co-researchers is critical to the development of knowledge. Research must lead not only to the generation of new knowledge but also to action for social change.

There is some usefulness in being able to distinguish between different models of cooperative inquiry because different problems lend themselves to different models of research. These approaches to research start from different ideological perspectives, draw on different intellectual traditions, and emphasize different aspects of practice. Action research grew out of the work of organizational development theorists in the 1940s who were interested in studying social systems in order to alter or change them, often in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration (Brown and Tandon 1983).

The participatory research tradition emerged from work with oppressed people in the Third World and focused on linking investigation, education, and action. Participatory research frequently emerges in situations where people want to make changes thoughtfully and with critical reflection; that is, people want to think about

these starting points, how in practice they might be changed (*Kemmis and McTaggart 2000*). Moving beyond merely recording observable facts, participatory research has had the explicit intention of collectively investigating reality in order to transform it (*Hall 1981; Hall 1992; Brown and Tandon 1983; Fals-Borda 1991*). Thus, participatory research combines three activities—investigation, education, and action. It is a method of social investigation of problems, involving participation of oppressed and ordinary people in problem posing and problem solving (*Hall 1981*). The direct link between research and action is the most distinctive aspect of participatory research. Participatory research aims at three types of changes: (1) development of a critical consciousness of both researcher and participants; (2) improvement of the lives of those involved in the research process; and (3) transformation of fundamental societal structures and relationships .

Participatory research can be seen as a significant shift from social science research, which views people as the subjects of research (it is research *on* the people) and it is also a shift from doing research *with* the people as in action research. Participatory research represents a shift to research being done *by* the people, as co-researchers.

Community-based research is viewed by some scholars as a subset of action research and by other scholars as a subset of participatory research. Like the other traditions modeled within cooperative inquiry, community-based research is a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that enables people to take systematic action to identify their strengths and to resolve specific concerns or issues. It focuses on methods and techniques of inquiry that take into account people's history, culture, interactional practices, emotional lives, and economic and social settings (*Stringer 1999*). Action researchers tend to not advocate for the groups or people with whom they work, whereas participatory researchers generally ally themselves with marginalized groups and do become advocates.

### Key Principles for Community-Based Research

Community-based research begins with a recognition that listening to community voices is crucial. Determining how best to do this requires careful analysis of at least two aspects of a community perspective: existing community organizations and grassroots community members. Listening to each of these constituencies is important. There is a tendency in American higher education to assume that "the community" is anyone outside the university. We

need to be more careful in our use of terminology. Working closely with community organizations, though quite important, is not synonymous with listening to community voices. We also need to hear the perspectives of community residents and not assume that community organizations speak for the whole community. Different strategies can be employed to hear diverse voices; what is most appropriate varies from situation to situation. Collaboration is the key.

Basic principles for community-based research offer starting points, but it is important to remember that different emphases will apply in different settings.

- Community members help define the research question(s) to be explored.
- Community members and researchers determine appropriate methodologies to collect information (quantitative and qualitative).
- Keep dialogue between community members and researchers ongoing and consistent; establish regular feedback loops.
- Present research findings in a way that community members can use to develop action plans and organize themselves to bring change.

The challenge for academic researchers who engage in community-based research is to stay connected to the process long enough to make sure that action for social change is the result of the research process. Community members decide the nature of the desired change and work to implement it, but academic researchers who care about community change do more than just prepare a final report and then move on. Embarking on a community-based research project requires a longer-term commitment on the part of the academic researcher and a willingness to enter into the "messy" world of community dynamics.

### **An Example of Community-Based Research in the Academy**

The particular project we will describe in the remainder of the paper grows out of a commitment on the part of Calvin College to be engaged in community-based research. This is a new initiative and we admit that these are still introductory steps to move us beyond merely studying the community as a subject to engaging with the community as a research partner. Hearing the story of our successes and challenges may be instructive for other researchers interested in undertaking community-based research. Using the

categories described above under alternative research traditions, we would place our work within the participatory research tradition. We are taking initial steps to engage more community partners as co-researchers in addressing issues in our community.

In early 2001 several community organizations in Grand Rapids, Michigan, approached Calvin College to develop a joint proposal to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to establish a Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) in their community. Calvin College is a Christian comprehensive liberal arts college in Grand Rapids known for its academic excellence and its commitment to scholarship and service. Calvin has a long history of community engagement and outreach through its academically based service-learning program, and many long-term community partnerships have been established over the past several decades. Applying for and receiving funding from HUD through its Office of University Partnerships has enabled the College to move to a new level of engagement.

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The Calvin COPC program focuses in one particular neighborhood called Burton Heights and the work clusters around four areas: education, health, business/economic development, and housing. Calvin faculty and staff from diverse disciplinary backgrounds are working with seven community organizations in this neighborhood to do research and outreach to develop plans for social change in Burton Heights. Combining the perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds of social work and nursing has helped us to broaden our understanding of community well-being. Well-being goes beyond physical health to include social well-being, economic stability, education, and general access to resources. Faculty and students from the Departments of Nursing, Social Work, and Spanish collaborated on this initial research, which made possible a more holistic approach.

The target neighborhood where our work began has undergone tremendous demographic change in the last ten years—for example, there has been a huge influx of Hispanic residents. According to census data, the neighborhood changed from being 26 percent Hispanic in 1990 to being 63 percent Hispanic in 2000. This is remarkable change in such a short time, and it presents exciting opportunities and some unique challenges.

### Methodology: Focus Groups

In describing any research it is important for researchers to clearly describe the choices they made along the way so their work is open to scrutiny and accountability. One of the choices we made was to begin our community-based research using qualitative methods, specifically focus groups among community residents. We began this partnership with the community giving voice to their strengths, their hopes and their concerns. We conducted two sets of focus groups: one set focused on education and parents' concerns about their neighborhood school; the second set of focus groups centered on health and social concerns as seen through the eyes of community residents.

Calvin faculty were trained to serve as facilitators for the focus groups; students took notes and transcribed verbatim the recorded tapes. Once the transcripts were completed, a coding system was developed that was used to analyze the data and prepare a report that was shared with the community.

The findings of the focus groups in education were used by the school's PTO (parent teacher organization) to organize people around several key issues. An important one is safety for children during drop-off and pick-up. The findings of the focus group on health were among the tools used to develop a survey that was administered during spring 2002. This process is further described in the following sections.

### Methodology: Neighborhood Health Survey

**Development:** In order to have community members help define the research questions addressed through the survey, their voice was listened to first. The focus group provided resident feedback on health care strengths and needs and overall social well-being in the neighborhood. Some of the information given by residents was expected; other information would have been unknown to the college and neighborhood health care partners had the focus group not taken place. Several residents unexpectedly talked about the need to have supervised recreational activity for children after school to prevent engagement in unhealthy and unsafe behaviors. This led to the inclusion of such a question on the survey and results revealed it was highly supported by the neighborhood at large. In addition, another focus group theme was the community's lack of awareness of one of the partnering neighborhood clinics. Survey results overwhelmingly supported this theme too. Although survey data did not support every theme noted from the focus group,

it supported the majority. The focus group allowed neighborhood residents to be incorporated into the research process as experts in defining their own health-related strengths and weaknesses.

Second, the college sought to listen to the voice of the neighborhood health care partners. The group engaged in several dialogues sessions to discuss the priority health care strengths and needs. Some concerns brought up were the lack of health insurance in the neighborhood and the high incidence of asthma, diabetes, and hypertension. These themes were incorporated into the survey questions. All of the neighborhood health partners reviewed the survey questions before the survey was completed. Feedback was incorporated and changes were made based on their input.

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Third, Calvin sought to listen to the voice of nursing and social work students. They were asked to review the survey and give their feedback on the questions, the wording, and the flow. The purpose of this step was to engage students in the partnership, let them know that their voice was valuable, and increase ownership of the project they would be working on.

**Implementation:** The first step in implementation was the creation of research teams. Multidisciplinary teams were comprised of nursing, social work, and Spanish students. Before beginning, all students attended a training session where the research protocol was reviewed and questions were answered. This strategy led to clarity, consistency, and a more reliable survey. The other purpose for the training session was to have students spend time together building rapport to increase investment in working together and completing the project.

Next, a pre-test was conducted. Student research teams tested the survey on a small sample of neighborhood residents. This method provided valuable information. It helped to reveal glitches in the research protocol, provided a way to incorporate resident feedback on survey design and questions, and helped us discern whether the Spanish surveys translated by academics were consistent with the Spanish spoken in the neighborhood. Several improvements to the survey were made as a result of the pre-test. As an added benefit, the pre-test increased student confidence in implementing the survey.

After all these steps, the research teams were ready to conduct the survey. A systematic random sample was drawn by choosing every third block in the geographically defined neighborhood. Students surveyed every other household on face blocks. In order to guarantee a broad representative sample, surveys were completed during varying times of the day, evening, and weekend.

*Evaluation:* The resident response to the survey was very positive. Of the households approached, 53 percent completed the survey, 27 percent were not home, 15 percent refused, and 5 percent were ineligible. Residents expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share their opinions on health care and social issues in their neighborhood. Some stated that no one had ever asked his or her opinion on these issues before. Half of the 150 residents who completed

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the survey stated they would be interested in coming to meetings in the fall to help analyze the results of the survey and design a strategic plan for improving the health and social well-being of their neighborhood.

The student response to conducting the survey was mixed. Students developed a rich understanding of the strengths and barriers residents face in receiving quality health care. Some students were deeply impacted by the sto-

ries they heard from residents. Unfortunately, in this experience students did not become as meaningfully engaged with the community as we had hoped. The survey occurred during a six-week course, in which nursing students spent two days each week in the community. Social work students and Spanish students were in the community even less than that. Students participated in several activities designed to increase engagement, but realistically one can expect only so much in a short six-week time frame spent with the community. To counter this limitation in the future, the nursing department has revised its curriculum to attempt to send students back to the same neighborhood over their two-year coursework in nursing.

Survey data were analyzed during the summer. When the demographic data from the health survey were compared with the 2000 census tract data, results revealed that a representative sample was obtained through the survey methods. In addition, results of the health questions were compared to health data available on a national level. *Healthy People 2010* (U.S. Department of Health and



*Human Services 2000*) revealed that our results were consistent with trends noted on a national level. The survey data will be very useful in providing benchmarks for evaluating the effectiveness of the partnership in the future.

**Next Steps:** Brief results of the survey were disseminated to residents through a newspaper article in the fall. More in-depth results will be shared through two meetings with interested residents. A summary of the survey results was also shared with neighborhood health care partners and a few key people from citywide health organizations. To maximize resident ownership and their expertise, residents will be the first partner asked to look at the survey results and identify priority health-related goals and objectives. Next neighborhood health care partners, students, and a few key people from city-wide health organizations will be asked to give their input into creating health-related goals and objectives. Within six months these two groups will be merged, dialogue will continue, and a written strategic plan of neighborhood goals, objectives, and evaluation methods will be developed. This document will be used to design future student experiences that match learning needs with the needs of the neighborhood. It will also strengthen the partnership by unifying its purpose and direction.

### Benefits of Community-Based Research

The benefits of community-based research can extend to faculty, students, and the community with whom the research is being conducted. As discussed, the nature of community-based research necessitates that faculty become engaged outside the academy and begin to listen to and work with community members. Community-based research provides a better understanding of the multi-faceted issues and strengths present within the community to everyone involved.

One of the benefits of the project described in this paper is that the multi-disciplinary approach deepened faculty members', students', and community members' understanding of key issues. Faculty members and students from several different departments worked together with the Burton Heights community, and this provided different vantage points for seeing and analyzing the current situations.

The rigors of life in the academy and the expectations of teaching, research, scholarship, and service often keep faculty members apart from one another, focused on issues within their own discipline. Faculty often struggle with the complex and varied tasks they

are asked to perform. Community-based research provides a forum for faculty members to begin to explore issues together, and to examine how one discipline can help inform and enhance the work being done in other disciplines. The benefits go beyond this cross-pollination, however. Too often, work in the academy is compartmentalized. Teaching is conducted apart from research and scholarship, and service to one's community is traditionally even more removed from this work. Community-based research allows faculty members to integrate this work into a complete whole. Ernest Boyer in his work *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990) argues that faculty need to be involved in the scholarship of teaching, the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of integration.

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There is growing evidence that professors want, and need, better ways for the full range of their aspirations and commitments to be acknowledged. Faculty are expressing serious reservations about the enterprise to which they have committed their professional lives. This deeply rooted professional concern reflects, we believe, recognition that teaching is crucial, that integrative studies are increasingly consequential, and that, in addition to research, the work of the academy must relate to the world beyond the campus. (Boyer 1990, 75)

Community-based research allows the professor to integrate his or her research and scholarship with teaching. Community-based research can provide a forum for faculty to engage the community in new ways, and to use this engagement to enhance and further their scholarly agenda, their teaching, and their service to community. This "new scholarship" as described by Fear and Sandmann (2001) produces a "new breed of engaged scholar, persons whose work is defined by 'engaged' forms in teaching, research, and service."

Students are also introduced in new and exciting ways to the voices in a community. Engagement outside the academy enhances teaching by bringing real relationships and community experience into the classroom. Students build relationships with community members, with peers, and with professors across disciplines. This approach provides students with a holistic understanding of community life. Students no longer

view the community from only one perspective but can begin to view the community from multiple perspectives. Students also benefit from working with residents who understand firsthand the community's experiences, needs, and strengths. Meaningful engagement with community members can also provide a window for students to increase their understanding of the profession for which they are preparing. Additionally, students gain from having professors work alongside them in the important role of scholar-practitioner.

### Lessons Learned

Although there are many things we learned in this project, we will highlight three things:

1. We need to carefully define the term "community."
  - Make sure there is clarity about how this term is being used among various stakeholders. "The community" can mean community individuals to some; it can mean community groups or organizations to others. The perspectives of both are needed.
  - In this project, community residents focused on different concerns, perspectives, and issues than did community organizations.
  - Guard against having community organizations speak for the whole community. Make space for community individuals to speak as well.
2. Community work can be messy, and we need to approach it differently than other academic work.
  - Be sure to define carefully the roles of all those involved. For example, we relied on community organizations to do the community organizing to motivate residents' involvement in the focus groups.
  - Academic schedules are hard to mesh with community schedules at times. This needs to be openly discussed. Share what constraints and barriers these differences might present and work to jointly resolve them.
  - University people have to *earn* the right to contribute. Community organizations and community members often view academics with suspicion or skepticism. It takes time for trust to develop, and learning to communicate clearly and honestly is sometimes a challenge.

3. Faculty involvement and engagement make a difference in how well projects work.
  - Faculty members can't merely sit in their offices on campus and assign students to collect data or become engaged with communities.
  - Personal involvement, though time-consuming at times, is critical if we hope to avoid disappointment and/or damage. Students need to be mentored to figure out their role in community work.
  - The professional development of faculty members is enhanced when collaboration and meaningful discourse occurs; it is hindered when collaboration and discourse fails to happen.

### Conclusion

The very nature of community-based research is to listen carefully to the voices in neighborhoods, empower residents to recognize their own strengths, determine their own needs, and to take action on their own behalf. This process opens a dialogue between community residents, organizations, and the researchers. Community-based research can be a bridge between the academy and the community, providing a forum for building relationships, learning from one another, and working together for social change.

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